

RELIGIOUS LIFE: A CALL TO MOVE BEYOND

Run, fainthearted, here are the burning men,
Oh quickly, into the caves! If they come near
You will break uncontrollably into a fury of flame
That is God, that is love,
Oh, they are the men to fear.

And stop your ears, cower! These wild voices
Cry: God! God! Love! – and once they are heard,
You too become nothing but voice,
You are smelted
Into a resonance sounding only the Word.

Only down in the dark, the thick warm moisture
Are you safe, for now God is let loose.
He has seized upon men who come near
He is totally present.
Oh now, terrible joy, now is Love
Without truce.¹

A sober look shows us that life in religious orders in Europe is seriously ill, or may even be dying. In a process that is developing increasingly quickly, this way of life is disappearing from the screen of public awareness and from the areas of social life. If the statistics are indeed correct, within a short time it will have been reduced to the margins of the European landscape. The former architects of European culture, says Martha Zechmeister, are becoming footnotes to it.

In addition, it often seems as if we have lost our “mysticism”: the dynamism which supports, confronts, moves us; that which attracts us and which makes us resonate with joy and satisfaction – both as individuals as well as communities. “Back to the founders, to the well-springs of one’s own charism” was the watchword of the Second Vatican Council for the renewal of religious life. Many communities have lived this process of returning to the origins of their own charism intensely and honestly. However, the crisis has shown itself to be so all-encompassing and radical that the return to the founders and foundresses of the individual congregations has quite clearly not been enough. Not only individual communities, but all of them, and indeed all of religious life has been affected. In order to re-discover our mysticism, we need to return to the source and foundation of all religious life.²

Within the Roman Curia there is a rather pale understanding of Consecrated Life and quite a few there see religious life as mortally wounded. Some of them describe

¹ Sr Wendy Becket, *The Burning Men*

² Martha Zechmeister, *Passion for God, Compassion for the Other*

religious as agents of self-secularisation. Look at the *Lineamenta* on the upcoming Synod on the New Evangelisation. There is scant and disappointing attention to religious life in it.

Many pastors and bishops lament the withdrawal of religious. They are worried by the decline of services and a few blame religious for bringing the demise on themselves.

But this time of crisis in religious life can also be a time of fertility if lived by faith. We are told that the fidelity of a small group under trial holds the seed of new growth. It is a chance of building religious life up from the bottom. We have to re-learn how to live, pray, study and do mission together. God draws close to us in crisis.

Jesus said, "I have come that you may have life to the full". He guarantees us 'life' not survival! No one joins religious life to survive. This way of life is only offered to those who are not afraid of facing the universal paradigm of death and resurrection. Some of us in leadership do come across those who say to us, "I am too old now or too tired or too fed up. Just let me die in peace". Or, "leave me alone"! They are scared, not of death, but of resurrection!

If we decide really to live for others, then we have a future.

There is a terrible gap at present between the culture of Catholicism and the culture of modernity. This crisis is also within the Church where it is hard to make sense of what we understand by faith. Essentially it is a crisis of meaning as the old meanings do not any longer make sense or offer hope.

Many of the values of modernity do not seem to operate within the Church: freedom, secularism, tolerance, innovation, commercial enterprise, and the pursuit of happiness in this life. In themselves there is much to admire about these qualities. But there is also a deep underlying suspicion about them. The greatest fear is that modernity will undermine morals. And so those who oppose modernity seek a restoration of pre-modern values: faith, tradition, social stability and hierarchy.

I believe that Religious Life has to mediate between the world of faith and the Church and Modernity. And this means treading a careful line between a Roman Catholic ghetto and being assimilated into society.

There are three wounds in modern life, according to Timothy Radcliffe: the wound of memory which is a loss of tradition, of passing things on from parent to child of the story that gives us identity and meaning. The wound of imagination is one where our horizons shrink and lives become petty and mundane. And the wound of belonging, where one suffers loneliness and wanders like Cain throughout the landscape.

The way we live religious life today is the salve that cures the wounds. We are people of memory, we hold the story and keep repeating it and celebrating it in today's language and symbols. In fact, the ministry of leadership is to hold the vision! We are free enough to allow our horizons to be expanded and enlarged because our God is like that: "Why when God has given us this wide and wonderful world, do we choose to live in a prison of all places?" asks Rumi. And we are rooted in our world, the real world of the majority of people, not the sham world of the privileged one per cent.

If God is missing, but not missed, then the new evangelisation is surprising people with a gift they don't know they need. It is a sort of pre-evangelising, a creation of a thirst, of wonder and awe and recognition of the sacred.

At the heart of all of this, of the sense of our mission, is recovering our sense and experience of God. This gets us close to the poor and excluded and awakens a new ecological and cosmic awareness of and solidarity with creation.

This experience of God will

- Make us less dogmatic
- Give us hope in remaining faithful
- Bring the preoccupation of people to the centre of our concerns
- Make us listen
- Help us to be humble, transparent and sincere
- De-centre us from our selves
- Invite us to true dialogue (which is the new name for love today)
- Place the emphasis on our option for the poor, justice for the oppressed and love according to the gospel.

We will be mystics for the mission, as De La Salle reminded his followers. And we will keep our eyes and ears open for where God is opening new doors in our world.

It is against this background that I wish to speak about religious life and its thrust in the future, a future that will force us to encounter a larger God in a world that is pushing its boundaries and forcing us to rethink what it is to be truly Christian.

Unlike Buddhism, Christianity is not from its origins a monastic religion. The beginning, the heart, the "principle" of Buddhism is the Sangha, the community of monks. It took centuries, however, before the first Christian monks appeared on the scene, with whom the traditions of religious life in Christianity began, and these were the decisively normative centuries during which the Christian identity was formed and consolidated.

It was an energetic protest against a church of the Empire and against its liaison with imperial power. It was the historical moment in which the Church stopped being a persecuted minority and integrated into and conformed to the dominant

culture at a breakneck speed. This conforming meant a reversal of its very being and message.

Religious life begins as an outburst of freedom against a religious system that is making deals with the politically powerful without in truth bothering one iota about those who would be economically exploited and socially marginalized by them. Jesus reminded his own religion, Judaism, with prophetic clarity and powerful authority about its own origins: about their experience of God who led them out of slavery and beside whom there is no room for other gods, gods who legitimise the dominance of imperial supremacy and suppression.

The first monks appeared on the scene exactly at the historical moment when the Church was for the first time seriously about to betray its very being, its vocation, its mission. In the Seventies Johann Baptist Metz defined religious life as “the Holy Spirit’s shock therapy for the Church,” as the reminder in the heart of the Church.” Religious life must be the thorn, the restlessness, the constant impetus, forbidding the Church to make its peace with the powers of the world. In a bourgeois Church it should clamour urgently and persistently for adhering to the roots of the Gospel and for the radicality of discipleship.³

Heaven’s imperial rule is like leaven that a woman took and concealed in three measures of flour until it was all leavened. [Mt. 13:33]

This is Jesus at his most provocative. Linked with the parable of the mustard seed, it is used to tell us out of humble, even hidden origins can grow great and powerful things. The saying occurs in both the Gospel of Thomas and in Q. Hence it goes back to a sayings gospel now lost.

The phrase ‘until it was all leavened’ speaks of the process by which leaven works on dough until everything is ‘corrupted’. Once set in motion, the outcome is inevitable and irresistible. In the ancient world, the process of leavening frequently stood as a metaphor for moral corruption. The Jews did not celebrate the feast of leavened bread, but of *unleavened* bread! In their defining event, the children of Israel escaped Egypt by taking their dough before it was leavened. Leaven makes bread to rise, but it also makes it to rot. It makes it swell, just as a dead body swells due to fermentation. Corpses were a powerful sign of impurity (Jesus calling the Pharisees unmarked graves that people walk over without realising it). Jesus warns the disciples against the leaven of the Pharisees and of Herod (Mark 8:15). They had just asked Jesus for a miracle (which he refused to perform) and such a request corrupts the whole enterprise. Matthew refers to their teaching as the ‘leaven of the Pharisees’ (16:22).

So what appears at first to be a harmless parable is in fact a dangerous one. It captures the essence of the Jesus movement. As followers in this movement, we are

³ Martha Zechmeister, *Passion for God, Compassion for the Other*

neither dissuaded by the odds nor naïve about how long it takes before the ‘corruption’ sets in. We are the leaven in the empire, that corrupts the empire’s values and standards.

Jesus people need to be considered a real threat again, like a virus that can’t be quarantined. We will hide ourselves in three measures of the world’s weary madness and set in motion our peculiar form of fermentation: the power of love is greater than the love of power.

Instead of passing one more resolution about the importance of feeding the hungry, we can simply resolve to actually feed them – and then resolutely go about doing so. We can refuse to give up on the lost; we can forgive those who have wronged us; we can reject violence in all of its guises. We can refuse to participate in the glorification of war and tell the gospel truth: war is sin.

We will seek to live comfortably inside our own skins and in harmony with a beleaguered planet. We will regard the final act of grace to be that which makes a person gracious. Love of God and neighbor will be more important than arguments over the virgin birth and liturgical exactitude. The final act will be to love even the unlovable. We will do strange and wonderful things that make no sense to anyone and then we will smile when someone wonders why improbably wonderful things keep happening to us.

Can we do this? Yes, we can. We can do it because it has already been done for us. We don’t have to make it up. We just have to turn it loose. Heaven’s imperial rule is like leaven that a woman took and concealed in three measures of flour until it was all leavened.

Let the corruption begin.⁴

If we look at the task of the prophets in the Old Testament, we soon realize that the institution of prophetic ministry truly came into its own under the kings of Israel. The prophets saw their role as trying to keep Israel faithful to its vocation to be God’s people and to live by an alternative code of law. That is why, when the Israelites ask Samuel to give them a king, the Lord says, “It is not you they have rejected but me, not wishing me to reign over them any more.”⁵

And once they were given a king, so intense was the desire of the powerful in the land to be a great nation like the other nations, that in spite of all the warnings, they seized every opportunity to rebel. God’s desire was for Israel to be small and powerless on the world’s stage, but the people schemed for greatness, for an earthly kingdom, and the Lord was offering a different kind of kingdom.

⁴ Robin Meyers, *The Underground Church*

⁵ 1 Sam 8:8

This passion for worldly greatness also affected our Church. Called to be an alternative community of The Way, it was seduced by power and prestige to mirror the kingdoms of the day and take on the trappings of empire and Caesar. We persist in wanting to be god to ourselves, writes Ruth Burrows, thinking that we know the shape of our destiny and how to reach it.

When the Heart waits
by Sue Monk Kidd
p.134
about her son waiting to tell her he loved her.

During these troubled times, we must learn to wait in patience. Wait like the caterpillar waits in the cocoon. Biblical waiting: How often God's people seem to be waiting! Noah waits for the flood waters to recede; Daniel waits through the night in a den of lions; Sarah waits in her barrenness for a child; Jacob waits 14 years for Rachel's hand; the Israelites wait 40 years in the desert and 70 years in exile. Jonah waits in the belly of the whale; Mary waits for the child to be born; Simeon waits to see the Lord; the apostles wait with Mary for the arrival of the Spirit at Pentecost; Paul waits in prison. "For thee I wait all the day long"; "My soul waits for the Lord more than watchmen for the morning"; "If it seem slow, wait for it; it will sure come" [Hab. 2:3]. Note the parable of the virgins, five wise and five foolish – it is about waiting for the Bridegroom. The Father of the Prodigal waits for his son. As Gandhi said, "There is more to life than increasing its speed."

What has happened to our ability to dwell in unknowing, to live inside a question and coexist with the tensions of uncertainty? Where is our willingness to incubate pain and let it birth something new? What has happened to patient unfolding, to endurance? We fear waiting because such pauses in life bring us close to the dark holes and empty pockets inside us, to the rigidities and self-lies we fashion. Thomas Merton observed, "The imagination should be allowed a certain amount of time to browse around." Creativity flourishes not in certainty but in questions. Growth germinates not in tent dwelling but in upheaval. Yet the seduction is always security rather than venturing, instant knowing rather than deliberate waiting.

When we try to limit charism within a culture, when we feel that charism is only understood within a particular founding culture, we destroy its effectivity. I can only speak from experience, and much of what I say will belong to the stories of my congregation. But I also know that there is enough wisdom here to be able to make the connections for your selves.

The great challenge facing us is whether or not we are able to think big enough to move beyond what we have always known. I remember setting out with my own Team in mid-2002 to change the culture of our congregation. It entailed trying first to name the elements that we thought characterized us, and also held us bound. We could name:

- Hierarchy. Even though we are a congregation of brothers, we were very aware that we were hugely hierarchical. We spoke about leadership teams, but still operated as a General Council. The Leader was the one that everyone referred to. Subsidiarity was known but not really practiced.

- The Kingdom of the Christian Brothers. We were so proud of our history and our institutions, even though the spectre of child abuse was raising its head in some parts. The attachment to our institutions was suffocating any oxygen that could help us breathe again.
- Linked to this was the whole temptation to go it alone and the struggle to embrace collaboration with other Congregations and groups doing similar ministry. How slow we were to see our lay people as partners in our mission, and to hand over to them positions of responsibility.
- Clericalism. For a congregation of Brothers this was an anomaly. But it existed. It is a mind-set that placed us – a lay religious group – amid the hierarchy of the Church and gave us privileges. It set us apart from lay people, more than our professed life style did.
- Power and Prestige. This again came from our history and the good done by those who had gone before us. With power, comes arrogance. This is more noticeable in developing parts of the Congregation where our ability to speak English, the higher standard of living that religious enjoy, the education that we have – all tend to place us ‘above’ our fellow men and women.
- The male and macho culture we were brought up on. I remember ‘Christian Brothers don’t cry!’ I remember how important it was to gain control in a class or in school, to be better than the others, to ‘tough it out’, to expect all our confreres to like games and be ‘real men’. I think that smoking was part of the act.
- The superficial levels of relationships in communities and the banter that passes as fraternal love.
- The reluctance to embrace emerging forms of spirituality in our Church and outside it.

Of course there were other aspects of our culture which we encouraged and fostered: our tolerance of other faiths and our ability to dialogue with them, our care for the poor and for the education and support of Catholics, our commitment to Catholic education and the moral teaching to those who are not Christian, and so many other elements that are part of our heritage.

This is where we are being led today. This is the face of a God who is slowly being revealed in our world. And the good news is that we are only touching the tip of the iceberg.

As we face a Church with a decisively lay character, what will we be in relationship with that Church as consecrated people. What does it mean to really be evangelised by lay people? [The story of Sr. Louise Lears and how her mother breaks the bread and offers it to her, and then her sister does the same and then the other parishioners do likewise, till her hands are full of fragments of bread!]

After the Mass was over, as the family was standing in the back, Louise's mother said to her daughter, "I was the first person to feed you, and I will feed you now."

In that moment, Louise Lears' 85 year old mother revealed more about the love of God, more about living the Gospel of love, more about what makes a true church, than the entire hierarchy seems to have been able to reveal in quite some time. And she figured out that secret that the hierarchy doesn't want any of us to know: Lay people have extraordinary sacramental power.

There is so much I love about that story. But what I take away most is this one particular truth. It took being on the margins for Louise's mother and her parish family to realize that the power of God was working sacramentally through them. It took being marginalized to recognize that the church they already were, regardless of the hierarchy's vain attempts to starve Louise of the body of Christ. This is the grace of living on the margins.⁶

In the Beginning

Sometimes simplicity rises
like a blossom of fire
from the white silk of your own skin.
You were there in the beginning
you heard the story, you heard the merciless
and tender words telling you where you had to go.
Exile is never easy and the journey
itself leaves a bitter taste. But then,
when you heard that voice, you had to go.
You couldn't sit by the fire, you couldn't live
so close to the live flame of that compassion
you had to go out in the world and make it your own
so you could come back with
that flame in your voice, saying listen...
this warmth, this unbearable light, this fearful love...
It is all here, it is all here.⁷

⁶ National Catholic Reporter

⁷ David Whyte, *Fire In The Earth*